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Rising Political Consciousness: Transformational Learning in Malaysia

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Abstract: The qualitative study on ten educated Malays with regard to the rising political consciousness indicated their transformation is influenced by their culture. Political event can trigger a perspective transformation if it was perceived as threatening to one's communal cultural identity. The findings suggest that cultural values and religious beliefs facilitate the perspective transformation.

After more than four decades of gaining its Independence from the colonial rule, Malaysia is set to poise ahead in its quest towards becoming a developed nation by the year 2020 as envisioned by the Vision 2020 (V2020). The achievement of the V2020 would purportedly elevate the status of Malaysia to that of a developed nation, albeit in its very own unique mould (Gomez & Jomo, 1999). Rapid movement to modernize Malaysia followed its bloodless struggle for Independence in 1957 (Welch, 1967). Much like other countries under colonization, it was the elite who paved the road towards Independence (Means, 1991). Except for a brief period of 1969 when racial clashes erupted, the modernization of Malaysia was relatively smooth flowing. Furthermore, with a steady economic growth over the 70s, 80s and early 90s, it was apparent that the masses, especially the ethnic Malays, were happy with the direction taken by the government. This was clearly reflected by the results of the general elections prior to the 10th General Election, held every five years, where the governing coalition party continued to be returned to power with resounding majority.

This rosy picture was shattered by the Asian Economic Crisis that began in 1997. The crisis spreads like wildfires and devastated many countries in the region. As for Malaysia, after years of remarkable rates of economic growth, she suffered her worst economic crisis with collapsing currencies and plunging stock market (OTN, 1998). The crisis brought together with it many social, economic, and political events that shook various facets of life in the country (Gomez & Jomo, 1999). Among them include; the collapse of many business entity, the removal of the then Deputy Prime Minister (DPM) from active politics, and the pegging of local currency to the US dollar. During this period, for the first time, thousands of people took to the streets demanding for reforms and hundreds were arrested each week. The results of the 10th General Election (GE) held in the aftermath of this debacle showed that the people, especially the ethnic Malays had significantly changed their political allegiance. Why were these people reacted the way they did? How was their reaction towards the events like? What was significant about the changes they went through? This paper presents part of findings of a larger study to explore the learning process of people who experienced a perspective transformation in the aftermath of the economic turmoil in Malaysia in 1988. The purpose of this paper was to have in-depth understanding about the event that trigger a perspective transformation experienced by them. The paper deliberate on the following research question: 1) what triggered the perspective transformation among the selected individuals? and 2) what facilitated the perspective transformation to occur?

Theoretical Framework

According to Imel (1998) the way people choose to vote is influenced by their meaning structures or frame of reference. Changes in meaning structure occur when individuals experience a transformative learning process. Transformative learning is the process whereby adult learners critically examine their beliefs, assumptions, and values in light of acquiring new knowledge and begin a process of personal and

social changes (Mezirow, 1978). The catalyst of perspective transformation can be disorienting dilemma – a particular life event or life experience that triggers an acute internal/external crisis or an “integrating circumstances” - occurs after an indefinite period of conscious or unconscious searching of something that is missing in life (Clark, 1991, pp.117-118).

Mezirow (1991) explained that when a radically different and incongruent experience cannot be assimilated into the meaning perspective, it is either rejected or the meaning perspective is transformed. Taylor (1998) upon analyzing Mezirow’s idea wrote:

A transformed meaning perspective is the development of a new meaning structure. This development is usually the results of a disorienting dilemma due to a disparate experience in conjunction with the reappraisal of previous assumptions and presuppositions (p.7).

The way adults respond to their world have been explained by various perspective of adult development through concepts such as; generativity (Erikson, 1982), seasons (Levinson, 1986), and faith (Fowler, 1981). Bee’s (1996) metaphorical description of adult in the middle age as the sun, radiating its own light to shine others is particularly illuminating to the study.

Research Design

The nature of the study calls for the employment of the qualitative methodology. Mumbay (1984) clarifies that qualitative methods address the uniqueness of an individual within a particular situation and period. The lack of theory or an inadequately fit of theory to a phenomenon is usually the reason for conducting a qualitative study. In the case of this study, no research has yet been conducted to explore the perspective transformation as experienced by Malaysians. In this study, the samples were ten educated Malay individuals who live or work in the Klang Valley, where the capital city Kuala Lumpur is located. Malays are chosen to be the subject of the study because they are the majority race in the country comprising 60 percent of the population. As such they also have the biggest number of electoral voters (Political Analysis Bureau, 2000). Their age ranges between 35-45 years old. All are married with an average of four children.

Politically, United Malay National Organization (UMNO), the party that represents the Malays is also the biggest political party in Malaysia, and has been the backbone of the coalition government that has ruled Malaysia since Independence. As such, UMNO is the most powerful party that often directly influences the direction of the nation. With Malays as its support base, changes in the manner of voting or political alliances of the Malays, could effectively impact the nation’s future direction. Thus, it is paramount for this study to explore the changes that are being felt by individuals within the Malay communities.

The reason for choosing educated individuals is because this group of people often shied away from being in the mainstream politics and has to be coerced into joining a political party with promise of handsome rewards before they would eventually join (Wariya, 1993). However, the tenth GE saw active involvement in politics among educated Malays, especially those working with the government (Utusan Malaysia Online, 1999). Klang Valley was chosen because the intensity of the turmoil was most strongly felt here than in other places (Pillai, 2000). This could be seen in the vote swings, which indicated tremendous changes taking place in the Klang Valley.

For this study a snowballing sampling technique was employed to choose a sample. This technique is deemed most appropriate because the researcher cannot determine which individuals had experienced rising political consciousness unless he was informed about it. Furthermore, the study also touches on issues deemed sensitive in the country. In order to be selected as an informant an individual who reportedly experienced perspective transformation must satisfy one of the following criteria. During the period of the turmoil until the voting day, he/she did any of the following: (1) changes membership of

political party, (2) did not discard party's membership, but voted for opposing party, (3) applied to be registered as voter, which they had never bothered to do in previous elections despite their eligibility, or (4) actively involved in election campaigns, something which they had never done before.

The primary data collection was in the form of semi-structured interviews to solicit information from the informants. According to Merriam (1998) an interview is necessary when we cannot observe behavior, feelings or how people interpret the world around them. For this study, the turmoil was at its height in 1998, while the election took place in November, 1999. The first interview was conducted in January 2000, nearly two years later. The interviews conducted in a mix of both English and Bahasa Melayu, a mixture of language commonly spoken by urban educated Malays, were taped and later transcribed verbatim. Besides interviews, the researcher also collect relevant documents on the issues, views and news related to the turmoil. These include magazines, political party's newspaper, books, and online materials. Documents offer a rich source of information (Patton, 1990). The researcher employed a more traditional approach parallel to the cut-and-paste method during data analysis. In order to make meaning of the interview transcription and other documents, the researcher used the constant comparative method of analysis (Glazer and Strauss, 1967).

In the larger study, questions were asked concerning the informants experienced in taking part in the 10th GE. Further probing was carried out to solicit reasons as to why their actions and feelings were relatively different than during all the previous GEs. Inductive analysis revealed themes related to trigger event necessary for a perspective transformation, and points to factors facilitating it to occur.

Findings and Conclusions

Two themes emerged from the data; abhor with the handling of the issues related to the sacking of the ex-DPM, and feeling of being intellectually demeaned. The findings revealed that the informants could not accept that the ex-DPM was guilty as alleged. Their interpretations of the allegation include; too much, unacceptable, unproven, unbelievable, fabricated, ridiculous, outrageous, preposterous, rubbish, and a political ploy. As for the treatments, they felt it was unacceptable especially when used against a person who once holding high public office. Among their description of the treatments was that they were; inhuman, unfair, wrong, lack decency, unimaginable, and unfair. These categories led to the creation of the first theme, that is, abhor with issues surrounding the sacking of the sacked DPM.

The findings also showed that the informants felt the actions undertaken by the authority in dealing with the crisis demeaned them intellectually. The categories within this theme include; felt having been lied to, insult their intelligent, and treated as fools. To them the official explanation provided by the authority with regards to the event indicated the issue was religiously wrong. They had to make the necessary leap towards becoming more politically conscious since it was perceived as the right way to respond.

Political Event Can Trigger a Perspective Transformation

The major conclusion of the study was political event can trigger perspective transformation. Participants in the study revealed they had experienced a disorienting dilemma as a result of having to deal with issues surrounding the sacking of the ex-DPM. One participant related that he was having dinner with a friend at a food stall when the news came on the television. He said: "I did not really hear it as I was facing the other way... And at that time my wife called me through my mobile. "DPM was sacked" she said something like that. I was startled and confused, and I started asking my friend, "Is it true?"... I felt something wrong with it. After that my mind immediately switched. Yes, the sacking trigger me to switch my mind" This concurs with the notion of a disorienting dilemma as identified by Mezirow (1978). According to Mezirow (1996) often these experiences are stressful and painful and can threaten the very core of one existence. One informant claimed that: "That means, the hope that I had before was just a mirage, you

see...just a mirage.” Again, this is also inline with another finding by Clark (1993) that another condition necessary for triggering change is internal disillusionment whereby the participants recognize previous approaches and solutions are no longer adequate. In this case an external event had impacted the informant by triggering the dilemma and act as catalyst to transformative learning. This is inline with the finding by Scott (1991) that an external event can provoke an internal dilemma.

The event, which saw the sacking and the subsequent treatment of the ex-DPM, were something that the participants had never observed in the history of Malaysian politics. Although the authority chose to treat the issue as moral, albeit social issue, but to the informants it was political. One participant reiterated this stand:

This was what I told other people, if you really want to kick him out for political reasons, by all means kick him out and gave the political reasons for it, or just said “this is politics” and that would be enough. But the thing was they tried to cover the issue by giving this sort of stories that was so illogical.

Similarly, analyses done by Gomez and Jomo (1999) on the issue of the sacking also support the notion that it was political. They wrote: “For most observers, regardless of their sympathies, *the DPM’s* fate is seen as due to the threat he posed to *the PM* by offering a viable and attractive alternative and by apparently seeking to accelerate the succession (p. 201, emphasis added). Thus, the finding suggest that the sacking of the ex-DPM is political in nature.

Further analysis of the trigger event revealed that culture consideration is imperative. One informant who could not believe the allegation was utterly appalled for the fact that the allegation came from people of her own race. She said: “I think it would be better for you to just kill him off, rather than accuse him for such a crime. I could not imagine a Malay, a Muslim would concoct such story, that was very bad.” For a better understanding of the event, one has to take note of the fact that issues being waged in almost every general election in Malaysia were always cultural in nature. For example, the Chinese than the Malay will always treat issues on education with greater concern because to them, the way of preserving their cultural identity in Malaysia is through Chinese schools where Chinese language and customs are practiced. Any move that is viewed as threatening to the existence and practice of Chinese schools will vehemently opposed and quickly turned into political issue. The Malays, on the other hand, are more attracted to issues related to religion, since the religion of Islam gives the Malays in Malaysia its identity (Abdullah, 1996). Similarly, they too will vehemently oppose any move that is seen as threatening to Islam as that signifies threat to their cultural identity. They were hoping for the ex-DPM to lead Malaysia and thus effectively strengthen their cultural identity. Thus, his removal from public office was seen as detrimental. Therefore, these evidences suggest that political event can trigger a perspective transformation if it was perceived as detrimental to ones communal cultural identity.

Cultural Values and Religious Beliefs Facilitate the Perspective Transformation

The findings indicate that the crime the ex-DPM was accused of and the way it was publicized were outrageously against their cultural values. One informant lamented that: “I can see the violation of all the Islamic principle, all the human principle that I uphold all the while were being trampled by the authority.” The position taken by another informant vividly explains the cultural influence:

Of course it had nothing to do with me, but it has everything to do with my religion. So if it is related to religion, there is a Malay proverb that say “if you pinch the right thigh, the left thigh can feel the pain” (*Cubit peha kanan, peha kiri rasa sakit juga*). Don’t tell me not to give a damn about it, it is my religion that they made fun of. That is what I care about. It is like, you don’t eat what they cook, but even if the aroma of the cooking reaches you and

you smell it, then you have sinned. You cannot say, oh this is other people's problem, this is their house, their kitchen, and they can cook and eat to their heart content. No, you cannot have such attitude. We are living in a community...even if you cannot afford to do anything; you've got to empathize with it.

According to Abdullah (1996) to the Malay the concept of preservation of face (*jaga maruah*) is important in maintaining social harmony. Abdullah stresses;

Face means maintaining a person's dignity by not embarrassing him as an individual. It is most closely associated with shame, which could lead to a loss of one's family honor. As the individual is part of a family or a group, to embarrass him would also bring about shame to his group, family and community (p.30).

They were also seeing the manner the ex-DPM was treated as against their religious principle, since public shaming of a person, let alone a leader in high position of society, is unacceptable in their religion. Furthermore, for the majority of the participant, the ex-DPM, a respected Malay leader, is seen as someone who embodies the spirit of their religious beliefs. To them the issue is also religious. "He symbolizes all the beliefs that I have about my religion" confessed one informant who appropriately profess the sentiment shared by other participants. Therefore, these evidences indicate that the cultural values and religious beliefs facilitate the perspective transformation as experienced by the informants.

Implication to theory and practice

This study contributes toward theoretical explanations of transformative learning among individuals from a developing country. These individuals live in a different environment marked by different cultures, worldviews, values and norms. Presently, the literature on transformative learning has been mainly from the perspective of individuals or groups of individuals from developed countries. Generally, this perspective does not take into account the differences associated with individuals from less developed country. The study can help to explain the role of triggering events that act as a catalyst for transformative learning. Different individuals may exhibit unique trigger events that could be influenced by their previous experience. As such, cultural differences may play crucial roles in transformative learning.

Analysis on empirical researches that use Mezirow's framework in their study (Taylor, 2000) indicated that there are yet to be any empirical study on perspective transformation within the context of political event. Furthermore, although context and culture are known to influence perspective transformation, but unlike context very little is known about how culture plays its part.

Closing

The study on ten educated Malays in Malaysia shows that political event is capable of triggering a perspective transformation if it is perceived as threatening to one's communal cultural identity. The informants' cultural values and religious beliefs facilitated the perspective transformation.

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